DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 413 CS 506 330

AUTHOR Aiex, Nola Kortner
TITLE "The Last Waltz": Variations on a Theme.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Culture Association (6th, Toronto, Canada, March 19-April 1, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bands (Music); *Concerts; *Film Criticism; Films; Music; *Musicians; Singing; Songs
IDENTIFIERS Band (The); Filmic Styles; Film Music; *Popular Music; Rock Music; Scorsese (Martin)

ABSTRACT

When the film "The Last Waltz" was released in 1978 the rock music press lost itself in comparisons of the performances of the rock group. The Band's many famous guest artists, while movie critics, for the most part, considered it only a concert film. Few critics saw the film as an integral part of director Martin Scorsese's continuing body of work. In reappraising "The Last Waltz," its rich visual imagery and dark expressionistic style, along with the characteristic treatment of the few women who appear in the movie, mark this concert film as unmistakably the work of Martin Scorsese. Scorsese himself has said that he conceived "The Last Waltz" as an opera. Individual musical numbers are interspersed with interviews of the members of The Band, so that the music serves a dual function, as music and as narrative. The performers are characterized both by their performances and by their idiosyncratic clothes. Filmed as if singing and playing for themselves, each performer seems to exist within the vacuum of his or her own sexual or personal vision. Sometimes called an elegy, "The Last Waltz" is an elegant visual record of a celebration tinged with a sense of loss. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED297413

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Nola K. Aiex
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The Last Waltz: Variations on a Theme

Nola Kortner Aiex
University of Illinois
March 1984

CS506330

By entitling their rock documentary (or pseudo-documentary, in the words of one writer; "elaborate fantasy" in the words of another) of the Band's final concert on Thanksgiving Day, 1976, The Last Waltz, Martin Scorsese and Robbie Robertson deliberately embrace all American popular music from the middle of the last century when the waltz began to come into its own in this country until 1976, the year of our bicentennial. Scorsese himself has said that he conceived The Last Waltz as an opera[1], an observation which allows an even earlier beginning for American popular music, since according to the music scholar Charles Hamm, the very first popular songs in this country were "adaptations" of Rossini and Bellini arias with lyrics written in the American style which were sung at amateur musicales at home and on theatrical stages as well, before lines were clearly drawn between popular culture and art. Hamm writes: "Operatic songs were sung in the parlor, parlor songs were sung in recitals and inserted into operas. There was not as yet a stylistic distinction between popular and classical music; popular music was simply whatever sold the most copies and was known to most people, whether it be simple strophic English song or adaptation of music from Italian opera."[2]

The film's opening credits roll while a dancing couple dressed in old-fashioned clothes whirl gracefully around a large dark ballroom to an eloquent original waltz played by the unseen Band, a startlingly incongruous image with which to begin a rock film. We are thus apprised immediately of Scorsese and Robertson's grandiose ambitions, and a glance at the list of guest performers bears this

out. The famous artists participating in the farewell concert were the creme de la creme of American popular music from the mid-60's through the early 70's, and they represent every facet of popular music from pre-rock delta blues to the pop/rock mainstream.

Surprisingly, the film was not a commercial success -- possibly because the country, tired and dispirited after the Vietnam War years and the endless venality of the Nixon administration, was not interested in hearing about the musical idealism of the 60's; we were caught up in the disco craze and in the 50's nostalgia of films like Grease. Now that we are in a full blown, if superficial, re-examination of the 60's, The Last Waltz looks and sounds better and better, a solid and satisfying two hours of wonderful music and a stunning visual experience. But if many of the artists who appear were already in eclipse in 1978 when the film was initially released, some of them are all but unknown now. Several of the musical selections are concerned with longevity, and this is a preoccupation of the director in some of his other works. When I watched the movie recently on HBO with my fifteen-year-old daughter who spends a great deal of her time listening to music, she recognized practically no one, including the members of the Band, either by face or by name. Her only comment, other than that she had enjoyed most of it, was that nearly everyone played the guitar....

This film has been thoroughly dissected by critics, and I do not propose to repeat their commentaries. It has been more favorably received by movie critics than by rock critics. Rock writers have tended to compare the performances of the talent, as if it were a competition, ignoring the fact that the original concert lasted for

seven hours and Scorsese fashioned a two-hour film from that material. We have to assume that the performers appear as the director wanted them to appear. Another argument against comparisons is that some of the artists perform material very much associated with them and easily recognized as such by the audience, while others perform new material that is unknown to the audience. For example, the Band itself performs many selections from its traditional repertoire but also several new songs interspersed in the program. Martin Scorsese, in an interview just before the film opened, said "...we took one day to shoot the concert, and I had a 200-page script. But it was a real musical...in the script I had the lyrics in one column, who was singing what part in another column, what instrument was important in another column, and then there was a lighting column and a camera movement column, which I filled in."[3]

The structure of the film is a simple one: musical numbers interspersed with short interviews with the members of the Band; there is no attempt to relate a chronological history of the 60's or even a history of 60's music chronologically. And there are deliberate exclusions -- no psychedelia even though the concert takes place in the backyard of the movement, San Francisco, and very little mention of the British invasion. In one of the interview sections, Richard Manuel, the craggiest member of the group, relates how the Band came to settle on that name, simple and pretentious at one and the same time. It was a reaction against the names of the psychedelic groups which proliferated during the mid-60's, like The Strawberry Alarm Clock or Tangerine Dream. The Band, with its

emphasis on traditional rural American music, could never be classified as psychedelic, an offshoot of rock which in retrospect seems more quaint than anything else. As for the infusion of British music, both Van Morrison and Eric Clapton, who have solos in the film, appeared slightly later than the onslaught that came with the Beatles, and they are more associated with the blues of Muddy Waters and his colleagues than with the more pop tradition of the Beatles. And the inclusion of Beatle Ringo Starr and Ronnie Wood of the Rolling Stones at the very end of the concert seems more a matter of courtesy than anything else, almost a polite afterthought.

Scorsese's casual interviewing techniques, faulted in many reviews, serve to heighten the Band's near-mythical status; the individual members are so laconic and elliptical in their statements and reminiscences that their conversation seems like an echo of their music. Their recollections of life on the road in the service of music are so impressionistic and even romantic that the audience is left with the feeling that the group flitted across the American landscape in a hazy, alcoholic, drug blur. Parallels with the "beat" generation come to mind. The sense of loss and of isolation which pervades the film has been emphasized by several writers -- some rock critics have used the terms "obituary," "elegy," and even "jazz funeral" to describe the event.

Everything is closed in and hermetic, from the drive through the rundown neighborhood to the concert hall which is filmed from within the car, to the interviews which take place in several different dark, small rooms, to the stage itself which is elegantly but somberly lighted. The very reticence of the recollections of the

members of the Band combined with the disheveled formal elegance of the setting conveys the sense of importance that surrounds the film. Robert Christgau, in reviewing the album that was released when the film came out, groused that they "don't play nearly as smug and pretentious as they look." But perhaps the serious treatment was necessary for Scorsese and Robertson to reiterate their understanding of rock as an integral part of the American popular music continuum, rather than an aberration on the musical scene. After all, as late as June of 1981, the New York Times published a long article in its Sunday magazine which categorized rock as "an effort to sell a lower form of music to impressionable adolescents."[4] Well, none of the performers at this concert could ever pass for adolescents, and part of the Band's lack of real or sustained popular success stemmed from the fact that they never generated much appeal for the younger generation.

The dispensation of the obligatory audience reaction shots, usually found in films of live concerts, is a masterful touch. The performers seem lost in their music; they seem to be playing and singing for themselves alone. The musical numbers highlight the interviews, or vice versa, so that the music serves a dual function, as music and as narrative, and the artists also have a dual role, as performers and as commentators or characters in that narrative.

What methods does Scorsese use to enhance his elliptical narrative of life on the road and how does he delineate his characters without a real plot to fall back on? Well, I would hold that there are three or four extra-musical, visual elements with which Scorsese underlines

the music and lyrics which make this film a personal one and an integral part of his entire body of work, rather than simply a movie of a live concert: first, the idiosyncratic manner in which all the principals are dressed and which is explored in depth by the camera; second, the peculiar manner in which some of the performers deliver their expressive material; and third, the director's treatment of the few women who appear in the film.

All the guest artists could be characterized as musical individualists -- no two performers are alike -- and one of the joys of the movie is the effortless ease with which the Band adapts itself to their varying styles. They accompany their guests with self-effacing sureness and simplicity. Their elan is charming, and it gives the film a sense of security which is palpable.

As benefits their lack of musical ostentation, the individual members of the Band are dressed quite simply; all are in dark clothes, casual and unobtrusive, for besides being a group which functions as a single entity, they are on stage all the time. Dr. John, the first invited performer, is a vision right out of a beatnik world. He is wearing a purple beret, a pink ruffled shirt with a big bow tie, a purple tuxedo jacket, dark sunglasses, and a long necklace of voodoo bones and teeth. Ronnie Hawkins, who succeeds him, is an unregenerate "good ole' boy," tubby and sloppy. He is a fusion of sartorial styles: black T-shirt with unreadable motto on the front, tail coat, blue jeans, enormous cowboy hat and very long hair. Despite the fact that he is "outclassed by the other performers," as one critic has said, he seems undaunted and rips into his number with great glee. The guitar virtuoso, Eric Clapton, is also wearing a

ruffled shirt, like Dr. John, but his garb is more on the order of a Mod left over from swinging London. Van Morrison, short and plump, is wearing some sort of dark suede doublet with lots of laces and trousers to match. With his fair hair, smooth Irish complexion and prim, turned-up nose, he looks like an escapee from Sherwood Forest or even an overage leprechaun -- all that is missing is a cap festooned with bells. Joni Mitchell, the only woman who actually appeared on the program, resembles a quietly elegant suburban matron at a cocktail party. She has on a long-sleeved, smooth-fitting dark jersey top with a long, patterned dark skirt. Neil Young is in the basic campus uniform of the late 60's: khaki-green T-shirt, Army fatigue jacket complete with the original owner's name stenciled over the pocket, and old blue jeans. Muddy Waters and Neil Diamond are dressed nearly alike -- in ordinary blue-gray business suits which look very exotic in the context of the other performers' clothes. Muddy's suit comes complete with a buttoned-down vest in the best tradition of the blues singers, while Diamond wears his with a flaming scarlet silk shirt, benefitting his glitzy stage personality. If these two artists, with their similar suits and their similar big, heavy, inflexible voices, serve as bookends which keep the other, more spontaneous or eccentric performers from getting out of hand, they also occupy positions at the opposite ends of the musical spectrum -- Muddy Waters, the quintessential classic pre-rock blues man who was so influential for 60's rock but who never veered one iota from his basic delta blues style, and Neil Diamond, a pop music monolith whose eclectic material encompasses rock but who could never be called a rock n' roller. Their sober suits also distance them

somewhat from the rest of the musicians, and by the very end of the concert, which concludes with a sing-along by the hosts and all the guests, Muddy is nowhere to be seen and Diamond is looking quite uncomfortable, as if he had suddenly realized that he was at the wrong party and is only waiting for a propitious moment to make a quick exit.

Bob Dylan, whose career was intertwined with that of the Band, is the last guest to appear, and the most important. He has on a large-brimmed, deep-crowned white hat which obscures nearly his entire face, an ancient outsized leather jacket, a sport shirt with big purple polka dots, and his usual three-day beard. He is the very image of the picaresque traveler just arrived from the road.

What is striking is how closely every performer dresses to fit his public, performing personality, regardless of what is performed or how the material is interpreted. The image defines the characters as much as the music and lyrics they express. A British movie critic offered this appraisal of Scorsese: "An American Visconti, his talents are at the La Scala end of storytelling where the plumage -- the fall of a necktie, feel of a monogram, ritual unfurling of a killer's hair before the kill -- will always eclipse the bird."[5]

In an article which appeared this past summer in Sight and Sound, Terrence Rafferty identified one of the themes in Martin Scorsese's post-Taxi Driver films as: "the establishment of identity in public and the ambiguous relationship of self to performance."[6] This brings us to the manner in which the artists perform their material. The

only two guests who seem to be wholeheartedly enjoying themselves are the two who have escaped any kind of massive popularity, Dr. John and Ronnie Hawkins. Both appear early on in the film, and both perform lively, raunchy numbers in a disarming way. The more famous guests come later, and here the rule seems to be: the better known the artist, the more ambiguous or the more guarded the performance.

For example, Neil Young sings a moody lament, Helpless, emphasizing its essential image of paranoia by delivering it with a somewhat maniacal smile, bright blue eyes gleaming, one side of his hair neatly in place and the other side all awry. However, when the song is over, he shambles off the stage with his guitar and harmonica combination, nonchalantly chewing gum, leaving the spectator to wonder how he managed to sing and play two instruments with a wad of gum parked in his cheek.

The musical bookends, Muddy Waters and Neil Diamond, come across as impossibly macho. Muddy Waters is the only performer who plays to the audience, and he beams his Mannish Boy directly to the ladies in the front row. There is something at once delightful and ridiculous about an elderly man in the company of much younger men boasting about his legendary sexual prowess. Diamond, with his flashy, sultry good looks, suggests a character from another Scorsese film, perhaps one of the Italian-American hoods from Mean Streets who has come up in the world. His face, hidden behind expensive smoked glasses, betrays no expression, even in the extreme close-up to which the camera subjects him. His song, about the function of the songwriter, contains no sexual references at all, but when he is near the end of

it, he suddenly begins nuzzling his microphone, in a performance that is not so much erotic as pornographic.

In fact, many of the songs are about sex, and many of the Band's references during the interview sections of the film depict the road as a sort of sexual free lunch. The male performers show off a great deal for each other and this, too, has echoes of other male groups in action in other Scorsese movies.

Bob Dylan, in his place of honor as the final performer, is the most enigmatic of all in his stage personality. The movie audience's first image is of the back of his huge hat. He hides under his hat, and all we ever get to see of him are the ends of his Shirley Temple curls, the tip of his nose, and an occasional flash of pale eyes. He moves around the stage during his two numbers, and the camera pursues him fruitlessly. It is only when he begins to leave at the close of his songs that he spies someone he recognizes in the audience and smiles delightedly.

This almost totally masculine world which is portrayed in The Last Waltz adopts a reverential attitude toward the women who finally appear when the film is at midpoint. First, it is only a cameo profile in black silhouette singing backup for Neil Young during his solo -- a mysterious female image. Joni Mitchell, with her long blond hair and regular features is the modern equivalent of a madonna. She looks fragile and gentle, and Robbie Robertson greets her very delicately with a chaste kiss on the cheek. Emmylou Harris, a lovely, dark, rustic madonna in counterpoint to Mitchell's fair lady, appears in a studio sequence performing Evangelize with the Band. The male musicians are positioned on several high platforms;

Harris is alone on another separate platform. When the evocative fog-shrouded sequence ends, a lone man steps forward from below the single platform and Emmylou presents him with her guitar which he receives with great care, as if it were a gift from a priestess.

The other studio sequence is probably the musical high point of the film, one of the Band's best-known songs, The Weight, which they perform with a black gospel group, The Staples Singers. The Staples consist of three sisters and their father, Rev. Staples. In this sequence the members of the Band are grouped together on one side of the spare set, and the three female singers are together in a line, dressed in simple black gowns, across the set. Separating the Band from the women, instead of the deep chasm of the platforms in the other studio sequence, is the singular figure of the father. The sequence begins with a swooping closeup of the back of Rev. Staples wooly white head, and when the camera swerves around to the front of his face, he looks sad and patient, and he seems to be protecting his daughters from contact with the men. When the song ends, one of the women sighs: "Beautiful...," as indeed it is.

Robbie Robertson's genteel kiss for Joni Mitchell, the cameo profile in Neil Young's song, the wide space between the platforms in Evangelize, the positioning of Rev. Staples between the Band and his daughters all point to an insurmountable gulf which Scorsese seems to see existing between men and women, or even simply between individuals. For if the male performers are sometimes paradoxical or quixotic in their readings of their material, the female participants are so self-contained as to be almost unreadable. It is as though each performer exists within the vacuum of his own sexual or personal

vision. The Band's picaresque travels over the American landscape popular brought them into contact with many shades and variations of American popular music during their sixteen years on the road, and when the camera pans over them and their assembled guests during the final group number, it is a metaphor for everything that was promising about the culture of this country during the 60's. Feminist writer Ellen Willis has said that "the special value of sixties culture was its capacity for blurring boundaries, transcending contradictions, pulling off everything at once."[7] I think that the real reason why most rock critics found this film so "disturbing" in the final analysis is the implication that if the great performers on stage cannot quite transcend the contradictions, what hope is there for the rest of us? The Last Waltz is still, however, a deeply satisfying film despite its ambiguity -- an elegant visual record of a celebration tinged with a sense of loss, not of nostalgia for a past time, but of real loss for a promise that was ultimately unfulfilled.

Notes

[1]Terry Curtis Fox, "Martin Scorsese's Elegy for a Big-Time Band" in Village Voice, May 29, 1978, p. 43.

[2]Charles Hamm, Yesterdays: Popular Song in America (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 76.

[3]Mary Pat Kelly, Martin Scorsese (Pleasantville: Redgrave, 1980), pp. 26 - 30.

[4]Sidney Zion, "Outlasting Rock" in Read All About It (New York: Summit Books, 1982), p. 347.

[5]Brian Case in New Musical Express, Feb. 19, 1977, p. 28.

[6]Terrence Rafferty, "Martin Scorsese's Still Life" in Sight and Sound, Summer 1983, p. 186.

[7]Ellen Willis, "The Velvet Underground" in Stranded ed. Greil Marcus (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 73.